FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 14.11.2024 | Priyal Singh

New problems, old problems

Trump's return to the White House signals a new chapter in US-Africa relations, fraught with both uncertainties but also potential opportunities

The victory of President-elect Donald Trump in last week's US election may signal a period of renewed uncertainty and volatility in Washington's bilateral relations with African capitals. However, there may also be opportunities for more meaningful engagement if parties on both sides of the Atlantic get the basics right.

A dilution of US foreign policy towards Africa under the current Biden administration, and a possible reversion to what came before it during the first Trump administration, could prove disastrous. Relations between Washington and many African capitals between 2017 and 2021 were generally marked by mistrust, hostility and neglect. The more insular 'America First' worldview of the then-president saw Africa completely absent from many of its key foreign policy priorities. This was, of course, nothing new at the time, as the continent had never truly featured as a strategic priority for the US across prior Democrat or Republican Administrations. However, relations with the continent arguably reached new lows during the first Trump administration due to three key issues.

An unreliable, disinterested partner

Firstly, the administration's considerable scepticism of, and contempt for, international organisations and multilateral policy processes signalled to many African countries that the US was not a reliable, principled or committed partner on the myriad global governance and security issues that disproportionately affect African states. This issue was perhaps most acutely felt following delays and proposed cuts in the US-assessed contributions to the United Nations peacekeeping budget. Africa is home to the UN's largest peacekeeping operations, and waning US support for these operations has very tangible material impacts on their effectiveness and continued operation — coupled with the deleterious implications for the continent's broader peace and security environment.

Similarly, the US' cessation of voluntary funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency, its withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and the Paris Climate Agreement, and its submission to withdraw from the World Health Organisation, amongst many other international organisations and policy processes, signalled the Trump administration's disdain for the global rules-based order.

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Many African countries that remained committed to this order, which was still largely seen as being under the stewardship of the US, found this behaviour particularly worrisome. It signalled an unprincipled about-turn on Washington's part — again, casting the US as an unpredictable international partner.

A second major factor contributing to strained US-Africa relations during the first Trump administration was its clear disinterest, or arguable benign neglect, of the region. This was marked by long delays or a complete lack of filling key US diplomatic posts in Africa, and a lack of meaningful presidential initiatives specifically targeting the continent. Bilateral trade continued to decline during this period, relative to the continent's trade with other emerging powers and partners from the Global South.

Lastly, US-Africa relations were considerably soured during this period by the then president's off-handed and derogatory remarks directed at African states and their peoples. These remarks, which drew international anger and official responses from African capitals and the African Union, affirmed the view that Trump clearly did not hold the region in high regard and maintained an outwardly disrespectful view of African countries.

Cumulatively, this period was marked by the absence of a meaningful US strategic vision for the region, with clear aims or objectives, or any direct personal investment by the sitting president.

Changing course

Accordingly, since early 2021, the Biden administration has worked to correct the course of US-Africa relations by rebuilding trust and goodwill, while further demonstrating its commitment to prioritising African concerns on the world stage.

This has been achieved by providing a much clearer overarching vision for engagement with the region, as outlined in the August 2022 US Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa. The strategy sets out four core objectives to guide Washington's bilateral relations with African capitals moving forward: noting the need to foster open societies, deliver democratic and security dividends, advance economic opportunity and support climate adaptation.

Further outlined as a regional focus area in its October 2022 National Security Strategy, the Biden administration formally recognised the growing geopolitical weight of African states on the world stage, and the need for greater US investment to build and reinforce strategic links with the continent across a wide range of thematic areas. And while Biden, like Trump, did not visit any African states during his term in office, these efforts were nonetheless bolstered by numerous other high-level working visits to the continent over the past four years, as well as the December 2022 US-Africa Leader's Summit.

What comes next?

The question now is whether the incoming Trump administration will share a similar strategic vision for the future direction of US-Africa relations laid out over the last four years. Will the initiatives, agreements and decisions taken be backtracked upon, or perhaps not given the necessary political backing to be fully implemented?

Already, it is clear that Trump has a very contentious relationship with some of the core elements that should guide Washington's bilateral relations with African capitals. From the science behind the Covid-19 pandemic and the policies that should guide pandemic recovery, to the science behind climate change and the steps needed to ensure a just energy transition, to the collective need to promote open societies and strengthen democratic institutions — the incoming Trump administration may not be on the same page as its predecessor. Nor are its African partners, who have signed various initiatives with Washington to deepen cooperation on these issues.

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More worryingly, there may no longer be the broad Congressional support in Washington to ensure the necessary degree of continuity and predictability in the direction of US-Africa policy established under Biden. New power dynamics in the House of Representatives and the Senate could also likely spur on new legislation calling for a review of bilateral

relations with certain African partners, such as South Africa.

Hence, much of the groundwork laid under Biden is arguably now up in the air, and it may be necessary for policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic to start again from scratch by identifying baseline elements of common interest and future cooperation.

A silver lining?

While challenges abound, there may very likely be opportunities for increased engagement if both sides play their cards right. For African policymakers in particular, this should entail developing a thorough and dispassionate assessment of the core political priorities and motivations of the incoming Trump administration, based on its more insular worldview and more confrontational foreign policy outlook. This could lead to the identification of common issues for cooperation, which could be more transactional in nature, more focused on hard economic issues, and less focused on some of the broader governance, democracy, and open society related-issues (associated with the Biden administration's worldview of international order for the coming decades).

Moreover, this should include developing a clearer understanding of what powers are vested in the Oval Office and do not necessarily require Congressional support to be acted upon, particularly as they relate to the broad range of issues outlined in the 2022 US Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa as well as the range of initiatives and agreements signed during the 2022 US-Africa Leader's Summit.

The incoming Trump administration undoubtedly brings a much greater degree of political uncertainty and unpredictability to African country's relations with Washington. Still, challenges and opportunities abound in equal measure. It is up to policymakers in Washington and in the African capitals to play their cards right to ensure that new arrangements are reached for mutual benefit, while not allowing the aftertaste of the previous Trump administration to unduly influence what may come next.



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